

# Warm Peace and the Challenge of People to People Relations after the Abraham Accords

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Brief Analysis

## Recognizing and addressing the challenges in people-to-people relations is a vital step in furthering the efforts of the Abraham Accords.

"Today, we already witness a change taking place in the heart of the Middle East, a change that will send hope throughout the world," said Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the UAE's Foreign Minister when signing what would be dubbed the Abraham Accords at the White House in August 2020. A move that surprised many, the accords began to shape a new model for relations in the region—especially in its demonstrated interest in people-to-people relations. However, it must also be recognized that creating a “People’s Peace” needs more than words to become a reality.

The Abraham Accords were crafted in a very different spirit than the earlier peace agreements between Israel and Jordan or Egypt. The Camp David Agreement of 1978 did in fact outline plans to establish normal relations between Egypt and Israel, including diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. Furthermore, in 1982, a cultural agreement called for the establishment of two academic centers to facilitate cultural ties between the two nations. Yet actual people-to-people (P2P) relations remain effectively nonexistent. While an Israeli center was established in Cairo, it is guarded by Egyptian intelligence who make it clear that Egyptians are not welcomed. Likewise, after 40 years, the gates of the corresponding Egyptian academic center in Tel Aviv still remain unopened.

In contrast, a very different energy arose from the multilateral relations that followed the Abraham Accords. There have been over 127 memorandums signed since the agreement that have established new connections, trade, and collaboration in a number of fields. Trade between Israel and other Abraham Accords members increased by approximately 222% in 2021. A number of important collaborations also began to emerge in the fields of health,

tourism, and even people-to-people connections, with plans to foster further collaborations in the fields of academics, culture, and sports. Throughout our own engagements, we have personally witnessed some of the newly formed relations both on an academic and a P2P level. We are able to vouch for the very positive, open, and friendly atmosphere that we have repeatedly encountered at zoom events, visits, and meetings.

Under the shining veneer of progress, however, several challenges remain to be addressed. Likewise, a few lessons already learned through the recent efforts of engagement should be incorporated as the partners of the Abraham Accords attempt to strengthen their relationship and begin to understand each other.

One notable challenge is the asymmetric flow of visitors. During the first four months of the agreement, 140,000 Israelis flooded the UAE for business and tourism. In contrast, only 140 Emiratis and Bahrainis were able to travel the other way, largely on official business rather than as tourists. Also at issue is the different expectations for coordination once they arrive. Israeli NGOs flocked to Dubai looking for partners, without realizing why their emails to potential collaborators were not being answered at the usual speed of a WhatsApp message. These exchanges bluntly display the cultural differences that each of the Accords states needs to focus on understanding.

On the Israeli side, organizations were quick to react to the Accords, establishing some of the first people-to-people encounters while inviting delegations from the Gulf to visit the holy land. Dramatic images of the formal Gulf white Kandoras in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount quickly surfaced, speaking to Jewish and Israeli-Jewish audience. Many Israelis seemed to view Dubai in particular as the second promised land, a magical Arab place of acceptance where they could feel at ease.

On the one hand, it is not surprising that Israelis would quickly take advantage of traveling to one of the few open destinations available to them in the Middle East, as they did previously in Turkey. However, few Israelis seem to have noticed or acknowledged the differences in pace and style between their country and the Gulf. Moreover, in the rush and excitement, many Israelis may have failed to recognize that the corresponding situation in the Gulf among their Arab counterparts presented a more complex reality. The Ambassadors of the Emirati and Bahraini governments, for example, declined to meet with the civic society delegations that had arrived hoping for a meeting. The relevant ministries similarly responded to these overtures by sending a lukewarm message regarding the P2P efforts taking place.

While the appearance of Kandoras in Jerusalem spoke to Jewish and Israeli-Jewish audiences, the optics of the visit created unneeded friction with the Palestinians and with other more observant Muslims who interpreted the pictures from the Western Wall differently. And when Israeli delegations arrived in the UAE and Bahrain, the lack of protocol for coordinating such trips made them unwelcome guests in a number of Emirati and Bahraini corridors. This mismatch still continues. The Israeli and Jewish organizations associated with the Accords were quick to act and engage to what they saw as a significant validation of their presence in the Middle East. In contrast, their Arab counterparts were still unprepared to move forward given the complexities of the situation domestically, and they lacked the necessary structures to engage in P2P work.

Having been isolated for long, Israelis now seek to explore the cultures of their Arab neighbors. They also wish to extend a warm welcome to the people of the Abraham Accords—but may not have the cultural awareness of how to do so. As for the Arab side, the past and current public opinion makes them more cautious. Some welcome these new spirits of change, while others are not happy but keep it to themselves, and the rest shout their rejections from the rooftops. On all sides, it is important to remember that there remains a lack of familiarity with the other. Both parties operate differently and are subject to different internal sensitivities.

Nor has this been the only roadblock. Despite the good intentions, Israeli security protocols and administrative shortcomings have made the basic process of obtaining a visa difficult for Moroccans and Bahrainis. In contrast to

Israelis, who can obtain a visa to the UAE, Morocco, or Bahrain through a simple application on the internet, the reverse process involves complex forms and interviews. Colleagues who have attempted to pursue a visa to travel to Israel have changed their minds eventually after attempting to navigate this lengthy procedure. The one-sided nature of this travel is further emphasized by the fact that flights between Tel Aviv and the Gulf states are mainly operated by Israelis. This imbalance will be a notable hindrance to developing real reciprocity over time.

Even though the average Israeli may enjoy seeing the Israeli flag waved in Dubai and the ability to find Kosher food there, few seem to have contemplated what a "warm peace" can look like, and what else needs to be done to enhance P2P relations on both sides. For the Gulf partners, something more than pictures are needed. They would like to see that the new partnership has succeeded in contributing to the lives of people in the region and that their will to engage with Israel has resulted in progress in other areas, including the Palestinian one. In other words, while P2P relations have continued to develop, they have sometimes fallen out of sync with the official process of the Abraham Accords. This is a situation that needs to be fixed if relations are to continue to be strengthened.

History matters and mutual decades-long demonization cannot be ignored. Attempting to bring these societies together just with the hope that its will "magically work" will not achieve much.

As with any other seed, certain environmental conditions must be met for P2P relationships to flourish. For instance, it is essential to repeatedly calibrate and measure the temperature when developing new nodes of cooperation—these relationships must be built slowly and carefully to allow for the development of real roots. Either side could become disillusioned if too quick . pace prompts a "visible storm" or fails to meet unrealistic expectations. Instead, careful gardening is what is called for. At this stage, we must also keep in mind that we should not separate P2P from the broader picture of the emerging relationships between governments.

The value of P2P relations suggests that it should receive attention, backing, and support from the relevant government structures. Especially in an environment where official government approval is sought for most things, going against the structures will likely not yield success. However, if supported, civil society work and P2P relations can serve as the needed bridge between societies in the region and help convey our similarities, differences, cultures and even the everyday habits of conducting life and business. This will enable us to build the partnership we need.

If the Accords are to succeed, we must understand that the relationship between societies and those between the governments must be developed in tandem. The hope for mutual collaboration and success must be carried and shared by the people—but some caution and wisdom must be applied when building these channels so that they will succeed. These efforts are possible, and indeed critical, to the new chapter of history in our region that we seek to write together. ❖

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